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ABSTRACT

There is a need for more precise descriptions of the claims to truth of standardized tests, of their interpretive authority, and of the limits of understanding which are reached through their processes. Typically minority students who score poorly on such tests do because their schools fail to connect with them. Pedagogy, therefore, must somehow accommodate the linguistic diversity of the classroom to make knowledge equally accessible. Standardized tests are created to reflect the cognitive styles, contexts, and experiences of the white middle class who make up the mainstream, and this fact is not unrelated to the inequitable access open to opportunity, power and privilege in this society. The downward spiral of inequity can be reversed by focusing on teaching and learning desirable skills rather than on testing them, and on ensuring that all students experience diversity in faculty and course content. Also, certain uses of standardized assessments may support and enhance the learning process. One method of improving standardized college placement exams is giving students a chance to do them earlier in their high school careers and thus to be given feedback on their practice essays. An appendix contains example diagnostic evaluation form for practice essays. (EF)

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CS 217 400

MAKING DRY BONES LIVE: THE ROLE OF TESTING IN EQUITY AND ACCESS

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Despite the numerous problems with certain forms of testing and their use, high stakes testing, remains one of the most discriminatory aspects of postmodernism. So much is it a part of the academic landscape, a bumper sticker stated: "There will prayers in schools as long as there is testing!" This academic hurdle, like the education it purports to measure, has both positive and negative consequences– e.g., it may open doors to opportunities, or it could close them. However, despite strident opposition to certain standardized testing, concerns about its validity -- either as an assessment instrument of scholastic aptitude, achievement, progress and placement or as a legitimate filtering device for admission into academia, such testing is increasingly pervasive. The undisputed gatekeeper to the resources and for the attitudes and values of this society, such testing is used to valorize privileged viewpoints and, hence, to support a limited vision of success and achievement in this society.

A cogent examination, then, of testing and its prevailing assumptions must precede the development of effective measures to make testing serve its best purpose–both in the schools and in the larger society. Despite many proposed remedies, society's chronic inequities still exist; and somehow related to them are the alleged cultural bias in standardized tests, the high failure rates of certain groups, the chronic dropouts, and a plethora of other social ills. Here, I want to open up further dialogue on some of the thornier issues of testing–which are connected to the existential disparities in education– which are connected to the dominant political and societal exigencies that shape this nation. Access and equity in education, then, must be effectively addressed and achieved before there can be authentic standardized measurement–and neither can be considered apart from the access and equity in the way this country appropriates its resources, power, and privileges.

The maelstrom in which education finds itself today is reminiscent of the time the prophet Ezekiel walked through that desolate valley covered with the dry bones of the errant House of Israel--a people, who after losing their sense of ethics, morality, values and hope, had lost their way–had destroyed themselves –not so much by external enemies but by innate depravity. When asked : "Can these dry bones live?"Ezekiel answered: "O Lord God, you know."(from Ezekiel 37: 1-14. NRSV). As I look at the great waste of human potential, the crushed hope, the shattered dreams, the lackluster eyes that populate many of our classrooms–both urban and suburban (but for different reasons), students with neither the fire of enthusiasm nor the embers of inspiration for learning, I too wonder if we in the academies can revitalize education for those who come to us today. Shackled by a curriculum of "otherness," many students neither have nor want–anything we have to offer them. As the eminent poet, Eugene Redmond suggests: " To not want is to exist (not live). . .is to be de-minded/ Is to be disembodied/ And float like an apparition." Must we

again expect divine intervention to rescue us? Can we reverse the pattern of failure where now wasted human resources can be changed into productive agencies of this brave new world of work? Instead of eviscerating entire segments of society through faulty education and precarious measurements, can we reanimate their fallow minds? Can we make equity and access more than mere slogans, but achievable ends? Can we in all classrooms restore our students' natural inquisitiveness, their joy of learning, their zest for becoming the best they can be, and ignite their visions of a bright future to be waged and won? To do this, I suggest, we must honestly and thoroughly examine our educational systems which rely so heavily on high stakes, standardized measurements to tell them who they are and what they can do.

Despite the expeditious rankings tests may provide, consumers need to have someone who will state more precisely the particulars of the claims to truth represented by these rankings, the basis of their interpretive authority and the limits of the understanding reached by this process. Instruction , teaching, and testing must be fundamentally aligned. Surely, many essential elements of teaching and learning defy scientific measurement. Still a particular test may be valid for a certain purpose, given other considerations, but no single test fits all purposes. Also, certain tests may contribute toward assessing levels of accountability, but no single instrument should ever be used alone to make any critical decision affecting future possibilities. Authentic testing, furthermore, can provide certain comparative data between two clearly marked points vis a vis measurable goals and precise intervention. But a test cannot warrant that a goal is worthy, ethical, desirable, fair, or necessary. Human beings make those judgements–filtering them through their own predispositions and expectations.

Problematic also is the naturalized hegemony on which all (or most) standardized testing is grounded. Equity and access demand that, minimally, test items indicate and sensitively reflect the authentic, diverse experiences, cultural values, and achievements of the targeted populations–in textual choices, in learning styles, and in the experts who interpret the data. Research and corroborating data are filtered through the predisposition and awareness of the reviewer, making objectivity considerably risky.

Yet, testing agencies continue to point to the wide discrepancies between the test performance scores of many (if not most) whites and those of nonwhites. Such gaps in performance on these tests are not automatic, nor unassailable. Persons do not score lower because of their racial/ethnic/ social class category–as nebulous as these are. Most do so, at least in part, because their schools fail to connect with them–who they are and the relationship between themselves and what they study in schools; thus their potential is largely untapped by a curriculum/learning

environment of "otherness." Both the information and the information--giver should represent authentic diversity. Classroom experiences should invite–indeed make--all students feel that they are persons of worth and capable of significant achievement. The teacher *does* matter in how students come alive to their potential.

Shaping the teaching and learning of oral and written language use presents one of the most complex unresolved issues facing educators today. For language is not only a skill to be acquired and utilized, it is a prescriptive tool that structures and defines a particular world view. Consider the ethnic/gender bias pervasive in the American English language and in the pedagogy privileged in the schools, the "uncorrected" dictionaries, and standardized tests. Teachers must understand the language and meaning largely reflect the situational context of the user. Pedagogy, therefore, must somehow accommodate the linguistic diversity of the classroom to make knowledge equally accessible. Standardized tests are conceptualized, carefully constituted, and normed to reflect the cognitive styles, contexts, experiences, and perceived reality of the white, middle class who make up the "mainstream." This fact is not unrelated to the inequitable access open to opportunity, power and privilege in this society.

Increasingly many educators have become more sensitive to the complexities and challenges of language pedagogy and its measurement through the work of such professional organizations as NCTE/CCCC, IRA, and others. However, there is a gaping chasm between integration of the knowledge and actual practice in the classrooms. Furthermore, decisions about high stakes testing do not actually rest with these organizations. Rather, the decision-makers are the school boards and others who apparently place blind faith in such testing. Although these decision-makers often pay lip service to such concepts as multiculturalism, bidialectalism, bilingualism, the message is clear at every signpost: society's tantalizing rewards are directly tied to the extent to which one assimilates into the mainstream--Eurocentric culture. Not only that, many people of color regard this assimilative process which education requires inimical to components of their own culture. In any case, linguistic versatility would seem to be the more desirable option. Besides, who knows the depth and breadth of those unclaimed and unacknowledged tributaries which flow into this mainstream–culturally and otherwise?

Access to literacy through mainstream institutions for most nonwhites has gone from nonexistence to separate-but- (UN)equal, to loose integration, to desegregation, to *de facto* segregation–with few exceptions along this continuum. The rate of dropout, cop out, stop out, and outright failure-- compounded by a plethora of social ills, the information explosion, the widening digital divide, the proverbial glass ceiling, the acrylic vault--all pose seemingly insurmountable odds

for any claims to equity and, hence, economic freedom–unless the cycle of inequity and lack of access is broken.

I believe we can reverse the present downward spiral if we focus on teaching and learning necessary and desirable skills rather than to focus on testing them; too often the tests drive the curriculum. Second, we promote equity by insuring that *all* students experience diversity in faculty–persons who are, at the least, familiar with the life experiences and the myriad forms of discourse the students bring to the classroom as well as those deeply in tune with the way language functions on different levels. Third, students must experience diversity in staff, diversity in course content--carefully selected and skillfully presented with sensitivity and integrity. In such content students see themselves reflected as capable and worthy human beings from whom teachers expect much. If students have teachers who are committed to their success, they will use a variety of teaching strategies--adapted to the needs of the students who come to them. Parents will be fully involved in the success of their progeny. The necessary resources will be available to support these teachers and to provide adequate resources and inservice development. Then our classrooms will be places where students–as evidenced by the light in their eyes–gladly learn. They will have been awakened–made alive–to the joys of learning and its possibilities. Schools will then be places of hope and affirmation for students of all backgrounds.

Certain uses of standardized assessments may support and enhance the learning process. One specific current use of standardized testing is as a series of post-admissions placement tests. Such a test allows an institution to require incoming matriculants to take either developmental/remedial courses or to start immediately in college-level and graduate credit classes. However, over the last seven years or so, this specific utilization in colleges and universities is also linked to the movement to purge the campuses of its so-called remedial students. Such testing programs have spawned the proliferation of numerous state education laws, categorical grant funds, increased teaching budgets, and longer graduation lines. But they have not been shown to be a real and consistent benefit to either the educational system or to the university students as clients of that system. With certain minor changes in thrust, such testing has great potential for leveling the playing field, at least in theory.

In California, within the 23-campus, 375,000-student California State University system, the English Placement Test (EPT) and the Entry Level Mathematics Exam (ELM) are given every spring to thousands of high school students who rank in the top 33% of their graduating classes. (The 8 undergraduate campuses of the University of California give similar placement exams to the top 20% of graduating seniors.) These standardized tests are supposed to measure the levels of English

and mathematics competencies, but interestingly enough they also sort out the students in a quite predictable manner. The results are further confounded by such intervening variables as the level of test-taking skill and anxiety, the timing of test taking (before or after the Senior Prom), and the attitude of the test takers (given that they have already been admitted and often see this as just another inconvenience. At some campuses, therefore, approximately 78% of the entering freshman class needed remedial work as determined by their test scores on the EPT and ELM in 1997-98; in 1999-2000, the figure was 70%. While these data included all ethnic groups, the under-represented minorities were disproportionately included, given their small number among the total admissions.

In the California State University, a group of college and high school English teachers, under the consultancy of the Educational Testing Service, are collaborating on a different approach to the teaching and testing of writing to advance equity and access. Normally, the CSU uses the EPT to place all entering students in its tri-leveled writing program: T151, above a student is placed in regular freshman composition. Below, a student is placed into one or two developmental courses, 097 (T135-140; 098 T141-150. Such a plan consigned many a student to the lower levels, despite their unequal opportunities in schooling and access to coaching clinics.

Instead of waiting until the students are ready to graduate–when they are normally required to take the EPT–this program allows earlier intervention. Students in their earlier years in high school are given the chance to do practice essays on topics similar to those used in the regular EPT. The great benefit is the detailed and pointed feedback such essays receive from the corps of high school and college faculty enlisted to score them. Using the *Diagnostic Writing Skills Survey*, a form developed by a joint faculty committee, this guide provides a detailed analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of each essay and recommends ways to reinforce strengths and eliminate weaknesses (See attached form). This testing program, in sum, has the potential of serving educational access and equity because it:

1. Is accessible to all students, free of any costs;
2. Levels the playing field for all students, to the extent that the schools are equal in resources and commitment;
3. Intervenes at a stage when students can address shortcomings with the least impunity;
4. Focuses on learning, not testing with its attendant implications;
5. Forces teachers to look at individual student needs and address individual problems in a non-threatening environment and in a cost-effective manner.

The real need in our schools and in society is to know someone cares and is willing to demonstrate it in a productive way. Any school system, school, or individual teacher can infuse such life into his/her learning situation.

Reader #:_____

DIAGNOSTIC STATEMENTS

1. This is a complete list of diagnostic statements for the EPT essay. Your reader has checked off those statements that he or she found applicable to your essay. Statements that your reader found particularly relevant to your work are checked off twice.

(A) **Response to the Writing Task**

☐ ☐ 1. Your essay shows that you have a clear understanding of the writing task.

☐ ☐ 2. Your essay shows that you have an adequate understanding of the writing task.

☐ ☐ 3. Your essay suggests that you have a limited understanding of the writing task.

☐ ☐ 4. Your essay suggests that you do not understand the writing task.

☐ ☐ 5. Your response is so brief that it suggests you do not know how to approach or to set up an appropriate discussion of the topic.

☐ ☐ 6. Your essay does not address the assigned writing task.

☐ ☐ 7. You may have misread the prompt. Read the assigned task carefully to make sure that you know exactly what you are being asked to write about.

(B) **Development**

☐ ☐ 8. Your essay is carefully developed with thoughtful and well-chosen reasons, examples, and supporting details.

☐ ☐ 9. Your essay is well-developed with clear and relevant reasons, examples, and supporting details.

☐ ☐ 10. Your essay is adequately developed, but your reasons, examples, and supporting details should be clearer and more relevant to the writing task.

☐ ☐ 11. Your essay is adequately developed, but your reasons, examples, and supporting details should be more fully developed in order to give your ideas more depth.

☐ ☐ 12. Your essay is not adequately developed, but you do provide some relevant reasons, examples, and supporting details.

☐ ☐ 13. Your essay is not adequately developed; you need to provide evidence of more thoughtful reflection, with fully developed reasons, examples, and supporting details.

☐ ☐ 14. Your essay is seriously underdeveloped; you need to provide clear and relevant reasons, examples, and supporting details.

☐ ☐ 15. Your essay tends to narrate rather than analyze and explain the issues related to the writing task.

☐ ☐ 16. Be sure that your reasons, examples, and supporting details relate clearly and directly to the argument you are making.

☐ ☐ 17. Your general points need to be better illustrated and supported by appropriate specific comments and details in order to give your ideas more depth.

☐ ☐ 18. The specific comments and details in your essay should relate more clearly and directly to the general points you are developing.

☐ ☐ 19. Your essay is weakened by unnecessary repetition of ideas.

☐ ☐ 20. Your essay contains irrelevant material.

☐ ☐ 21. Avoid sweeping generalizations whose validity might easily be questioned.

(C) **Organization**

☐ ☐ 22. Your essay is clearly and efficiently organized.

☐ ☐ 23. Your essay is generally well-organized.

☐ ☐ 24. Your essay is adequately organized.

☐ ☐ 25. Your essay is not adequately organized.

☐ ☐ 26. Your essay is poorly organized.

☐ ☐ 27. Your introductory paragraph(s) should indicate clearly what you are going to prove or discuss in your essay.

☐ ☐ 28. The body of your essay should be divided into paragraphs or sections that deal, one after another, with important issues or aspects of the topic.

☐ ☐ 29. The conclusion of your essay should be brief and to the point, not a restatement of the main points of your argument or discussion.

☐ ☐ 30. Each paragraph or section of your essay should deal with one issue or aspect of the topic. Say what you have to say about that issue before going on to another paragraph or section.

☐ ☐ 31. At times your essay moves from one idea or issue to another without any clear logical connection or direction.

☐ ☐ 32. Make sure that your readers can follow your line of discussion or argument easily.

☐ ☐ 33. You need to use more transitional words and phrases to clarify the relationship of ideas and issues in your essay.

(D) **Sentence Control**

☐ ☐ 34. Your sentences are well-formed and show syntactic complexity and variety.

☐ ☐ 35. Your sentences are generally well-formed and show some syntactic complexity and variety.

☐ ☐ 36. Your sentences are generally well-formed, but they often lack syntactic complexity and variety.

☐ ☐ 37. Your sentences are not consistently well-formed.

☐ ☐ 38. Your essay indicates that you have serious problems with sentence construction.

☐ ☐ 39. Make sure that your sentences are intelligible and grammatically coherent, with clearly identified subjects and clear and relevant predicates.

☐ ☐ 40. Avoid sentence fragments, i.e., freestanding dependent clauses and phrases.

☐ ☐ 41. Do not run two sentences together without appropriate punctuation.

☐ ☐ 42. Do not join two or more independent clauses with a comma alone; consider using a comma plus a conjunction or a semicolon alone, or write two or more separate sentences.

☐ ☐ 43. Avoid combining two or more brief sentences in one long coordinate sentence. Practice subordinating less important ideas in a sentence to the main thought.

☐ ☐ 44. Make sure that each sentence makes a clear point and contributes to your argument or discussion.

☐ ☐ 45. You sometimes leave out important function words that help to clarify the structure of sentences, such as articles (a, an, the), prepositions, and verb auxiliaries.

(E) **Grammar, Usage, and Diction**

☐ ☐ 46. Your essay is substantially free from errors of grammar, usage, and mechanics.

☐ ☐ 47. Your essay has a few errors of grammar, usage, and mechanics, but they do not distract the reader to a significant degree.

☐ ☐ 48. Although your essay has only a few errors of grammar, usage, and mechanics, some of these errors may confuse your readers and detract from the overall effectiveness of your expression.

☐ ☐ 49. Your essay has a number of errors of grammar, usage, and mechanics. These errors stand out and interrupt the flow of reading.

☐ ☐ 50. Your essay contains many and serious errors of grammar, usage, and mechanics. Errors of this kind distract and confuse your readers.

☐ ☐ 51. The vocabulary in your essay is clear, precise, and varied.

☐ ☐ 52. While the vocabulary in your essay is adequate, it sometimes lacks clarity and variety.

☐ ☐ 53. The words in your essay are often vague and generalized.

☐ ☐ 54. Your essay is weakened by a limited vocabulary.

☐ ☐ 55. The words you use in your essay are often inappropriate for academic writing. Avoid clichés, slang, and colloquial expressions in essays of this kind. Try to convey your ideas in fresh and specific language.

☐ ☐ 56. Do not confuse homonyms--words that sound the same but have different meanings. (For example: there/their/they're, whose/who's, right/write, to/too, our/are, you're/your, site/cite)

☐ ☐ 57. Singular subjects take singular verb forms; plural subjects take plural verb forms.

☐ ☐ 58. Pronouns should have a clear and grammatical reference: pronouns must agree with their antecedents and be in the correct form to reflect their function and number in the sentence.

☐ ☐ 59. Your essay has some spelling errors.

☐ ☐ 60. Serious and frequent spelling errors can distract and confuse readers.

☐ ☐ 61. Careless punctuation can create ambiguity and confusion in your sentences.

☐ ☐ 62. Be sure to use an apostrophe with possessive nouns (Mary's book) and contractions (can't, won't).

☐ ☐ 63. Do not confuse plural and possessive nouns (the many dogs; the dogs' food; the dog's food).

☐ ☐ 64. You sometimes use articles (a, an, the) that are inappropriate or unnecessary.

☐ ☐ 65. Do not substitute one part of speech for another.

☐ ☐ 66. Use appropriate verb forms and maintain consistency in the use of verb tenses.

☐ ☐ 67. The coordinate elements within a sentence should have a similar or parallel structure.

☐ ☐ 68. Avoid misplaced and confusing modifiers.

OVERALL EVALUATION

☐ 69. Your essay demonstrates STRONG WRITING. If you continue developing the writing skills you demonstrate here, you are likely to be well prepared for college-level writing. Continue to read broadly and write extensively in order to maintain and polish your skills as a writer.

☐ 70. Your essay demonstrates ADEQUATE WRITING. If you continue developing the writing skills you demonstrate here, it is likely that you will be prepared for college-level writing. Continue to read broadly and write extensively in order to maintain and improve your skills as a writer.

☐ 71. Your essay demonstrates DEVELOPING COMPETENCE. While your writing shows promise, your performance on this essay indicates that you are not yet adequately prepared for college-level writing. Practice writing frequently in order to develop your skills. Seek feedback on your writing from your teachers and fellow students. Read extensively to help gain a more secure sense of the structure and language of writing. Improve your vocabulary by reading newspapers, magazines, and books. Make regular use of a dictionary. You can improve your writing, but it will take practice and hard work. It is definitely worth the effort!

☐ 72. Your essay demonstrates INADEQUATE WRITING. There are many ways to work on improving your writing. To begin, re-read the comments above very carefully, and, if you can, discuss them with a teacher or a friend. Try rewriting your essay in light of these comments. Seek feedback on your re-written essay--and on your writing in general--from your teachers and fellow students. Read extensively to help gain a more secure sense of the structure and language of writing. You can improve your writing, but it will take practice and hard work. It is definitely worth the effort!

☐ 73. OFF TOPIC. Unfortunately, your response does not address the question, so it is impossible to give you an overall evaluation on the assigned topic. Study the sample essays in this feedback package, noticing how the writers organized and developed their essays.